

APPOINTMENT OF HONORABLE ROSCOE G. BARTLETT OF MARYLAND TO ACT AS SPEAKER PRO TEMPORE TO SIGN ENROLLED BILLS AND JOINT RESOLUTIONS ON TODAY

The SPEAKER pro tempore laid before the House the following Communication from the Speaker:

WASHINGTON, DC,
November 25, 2003.

I hereby appoint the Honorable ROSCOE G. BARTLETT to act as Speaker pro tempore to sign enrolled bills and joint resolutions on this day.

J. DENNIS HASTERT,
Speaker of the House of Representatives.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Without objection, the appointment is approved.

There was no objection.

APPOINTMENT OF HONORABLE TOM DAVIS OF VIRGINIA OR HONORABLE MAC THORNBERRY TO ACT AS SPEAKER PRO TEMPORE TO SIGN ENROLLED BILLS AND JOINT RESOLUTIONS UNTIL THE DAY THE HOUSE CONVENES FOR THE SECOND SESSION OF THE 108TH CONGRESS

The Speaker pro tempore laid before the House the following communication from the Speaker:

WASHINGTON, DC,
November 25, 2003.

I hereby appoint the Honorable TOM DAVIS or, if not available to perform this duty, the Honorable MAC THORNBERRY to act as Speaker pro tempore to sign enrolled bills and joint resolutions until the day the House convenes for the second session of the 108th Congress.

J. DENNIS HASTERT,
Speaker of the House of Representatives.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Without objection, the appointment is approved.

There was no objection.

RECESS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to clause 12(a) of rule I, the Chair declares the House in recess subject to the call of the Chair.

Accordingly (at 12 o'clock and 6 minutes p.m.), the House stood in recess subject to the call of the Chair.

□ 1315

AFTER RECESS

The recess having expired, the House was called to order by the Speaker pro tempore (Mr. BARTLETT of Maryland) at 1 o'clock and 15 minutes p.m.

CONFERENCE REPORT ON H.R. 2673, CONSOLIDATED APPROPRIATIONS ACT, 2004

Mr. YOUNG of Florida submitted the following conference report and statement on the bill (H.R. 2673) making appropriations for Agriculture, Rural De-

velopment, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2004, and for other purposes:

[The conference report will be available in Book II of the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD.]

COMMENTS REGARDING CONFERENCE REPORT ON H.R. 2673

(Mr. OBEY asked and was given permission to speak out of order for 7 minutes.)

Mr. OBEY. Mr. Speaker, I wanted to take this time to comment on the legislation just filed. The legislation just filed would complete the work of the Committee on Appropriations and the Congress on a number of appropriation bills which were not able to get through the system one by one, as is the usual process. But in the process of putting together this omnibus appropriation bill, the House has, I think, reached a new low in terms of its willingness to reflect the will of the membership.

We elect in this country 535 people to come to this Congress, 435 of them in this institution; and the idea is that those Members are supposed to vote on various issues, and after those Members have voted, then a conference committee between the Senate and the House is supposed to iron out whatever differences remain between the House and the Senate in the consideration of that legislation.

That is really not what happened on this legislation this year. Time and time again, the conferees simply disregarded the will of Members of both Houses, went into a back room, and decided on their own, without consulting anybody but themselves and the White House, that they were going to cut the cards a different way and deal a new hand to everyone.

So we find, for instance, that in the legislation just filed, even though both Houses of Congress in public, on-the-record votes made the decision to try to scale back the expansion of the ability of large businesses in the communications industry to own television stations, despite the fact that both branches of the Congress voted to put a 35 percent cap on the percentage of American homes that should be reachable by any one corporate entity in the television business, despite that fact, the conferees produced legislation just filed at this moment which changes that cap and raises it to 39 percent. No votes taken in either House to do that, just an arbitrary judgment because the White House said, "If you do not do it our way, we are going to hold our breath and turn blue."

So the conferees caved and went against the position of both Houses. I think that is a national scandal. This is a backroom deal to strengthen the hands of the national media giants against local control of television. It allows ABC and NBC to acquire additional stations up to the new 39 percent

limit, and it takes Fox and CBS off the hook so that they do not have to divest as they would have had to if the will of the House and the Senate had prevailed.

I am also concerned about what has happened here with the across-the-board cut that is being provided in this legislation because, as I understand the impact of that cut, that is going to mean a reduction of \$178 million in crucial veterans medical care; and it is going to, as I understand it, severely hamper the VA in its ability to reduce the backlog in handling cases brought to them by veterans. It now takes about 157 days to process a veteran's claim; and this across-the-board cut in the operations of the VA will, I am afraid, result in seeing those delays expanded rather than contracted.

I also want to take just a moment to point out that this institution has engaged in a very questionable practice with respect to congressional earmarks. In the past, there is no question that Congress had provided significant numbers of earmarks. But in the past 4 or 5 years, in my view, that has gotten incredibly out of control. There is nothing wrong with Congress deciding to take a reasonable number of projects through earmarks in order to give this institution an opportunity to define what activities it considers to be very important; but when the practice explodes to such a degree that virtually every university hires a lobbyist to try to obtain funds through the political process rather than the process of peer review, then the Congress abandons all pretext of taxpayers' moneys being used in rational fashion.

The other problem, Mr. Speaker, is that when earmarks change in character from being a convenience to Members to a weapon in the hands of the majority party to punish Members of the minority party who oppose those appropriation bills, then we have, I think, fundamentally corrupted the appropriations process of the House, and I think it becomes a source of shame for the House in many ways. We have had a huge explosion in the amount of Member-directed earmarks over the past 4 or 5 years; and I would say that when that is accompanied by the idea that Members will be punished if they vote on the basis of substance, then I think this Congress ceases to be a body which can earn the respect of the American people. It seems to me that if we are going to allow earmarks to be used as a partisan threat, then what we will do is eliminate the ability of the appropriations process to be considered on the merits, and the only thing Members will be focused on will be their local pork projects rather than the broader welfare of the country; and I think that will demean the process of the Congress and demean the American people in the process.

RECESS

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. BARTLETT of Maryland). Pursuant to